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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BEIRUT 001950

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [PARM](#) [SY](#) [IS](#) [LE](#)
SUBJECT: LEBANON: MILITARY TARGETTED IN LATEST
ASSASSINATION

REF: BEIRUT 1442

Classified By: A/DCM Raouf Youssef for Reasons: Section 1.4 (b) and (d)
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SUMMARY

¶1. (C) A car bomb killed Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) Operations Director General Francois al-Hajj at approximately 7 a.m. on December 12, the second anniversary of March 14 MP Gebran Tueni's assassination. The explosion occurred near LAF headquarters and the General's home in Baabda. The motive for the assassination, the first against a military target in ten years, is not clear. Speculation ranges from an internal LAF political struggle, to Sunni extremist vindication for al-Hajj's role in the fight against Fatah al-Islam extremists at Nahr al-Barid, to March 14's efforts to elect former LAF Commander Michel Sleiman as president. Though it is too soon to assess the implications for the ongoing political impasse, and with parliament next scheduled to vote on December 17, the assassination complicates an already tense situation. End summary.

ATTACK HITS HEART OF MILITARY

¶2. (C) Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) G-3 Director of Operations Brigadier General Francois al-Hajj was killed in a December 12 car bomb explosion just outside his residence near LAF headquarters. The explosion, which occurred at 0705 local time, also killed al-Hajj's driver and military escort, and injured at least ten others.

¶3. (SBU) The bombing occurred in the Baabda district of Beirut, home to Yarze, the LAF headquarters, and the (vacant) presidential palace. Many high-ranking military officers live in the area, and the bombing occurred on the main public road leading to the Ministry of Defense. The LAF's military police have taken charge of the criminal investigation, with support from LAF G-2 intelligence assets. Media coverage indicates that the crime scene was a chaotic mix of first responders, press and security personnel.

MOTIVE UNCLEAR

¶4. (C) Al-Hajj was one of the names circulating as a possible replacement for LAF Commander Michel Sleiman, whom the March 14 majority has nominated to be Lebanon's next president.

While LAF contacts are quick to deny speculation that the assassination was the result of an internal power struggle, al-Hajj's elimination from the list of contenders increases the prospects for rivals such as Georges Khoury, the LAF G-2 Intelligence Director (considered to be pro-Syrian), and LAF Second Brigade (South Lebanon) Commander Jean Kahwagi, reportedly the favorite of Deputy PM and Defense Minister Elias Murr and his father, Aoun bloc MP Michel Murr. LAF contacts do not believe the assassination will destabilize the LAF.

¶5. (C) As G-3 Operations Director, al-Hajj played a significant role in the LAF's recent three-month battle against Fatah al-Islam at the Nahr al-Barid Palestinian camp. Some, including LAF contacts (who are downplaying any political motivations for the attack), speculate that it may have been carried out by Sunni extremists to avenge al-Hajj's role in Nahr al-Barid. Others view the assassination, the first against a military target in ten years, as a warning to Sleiman to withdraw his candidacy for president.

AOUN IMPLIES INTERNATIONAL
COMMUNITY AND MARCH 14 ARE TO BLAME

¶6. (U) In a press conference following al-Hajj's assassination, Free Patriotic Movement leader Michel Aoun called the attack a "protected crime" and implied that it was a conspiracy "between people benefiting from the crime and between the executor of the crime." He absolved Syria of blame, saying that, "In the past it was Syria, but today Syria is working on the success of the nominee of the majority." He drew a connection between non-Syrian foreign

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actors in Lebanon and the attack, asking how it could have occurred while the international community is present in Lebanon. At the same time, he lambasted the current government "under whose shadow all of these crimes have happened." Regarding motive, Aoun linked the attack to Nahr al Barid.

POLITICIANS REACT TO AL-HAJJ ASSASSINATION

¶7. (U) Majority leader Saad Hariri called the blast "is a link in the terrorist chain directed at Lebanon and its institutions, foremost among them the national army, which today pays the price for defending Lebanon's sovereignty, independence, and free will." Lebanese Forces leader Samir Geagea told LBC news he found only two reasons for al-Hajj's assassination: his role in Nahr al-Barid and the nomination of Sleiman as president. Geagea declined to accuse anyone, but said some people may not be happy with Sleiman's candidacy, and want to send an "indirect message."

¶8. (U) Druse leader Walid Jumblatt said that, despite the assassination, he "is not pessimistic, because the army is much greater and much stronger than the assassinations. Terrorism hit the army today as it hit the army in Nahr al-Barid, and as the army was targeted by Israeli aggression last year. This is the blood tax, the tax for defending the country, institutions, and national peace." Parliament Speaker Berri's Amal movement issued a statement saying that targeting al-Hajj "targets all of Lebanon, especially its brave army, which foiled terrorist plans and the plan to target Lebanon, through its resistance and in the south."

COMMENT

¶9. (C) Al-Hajj's death is the latest in a continuously growing string of assassinations and attempts since the October 1, 2004 attempt on then MP and resigned Economic Minister (now Telecom Minister) Marwan Hamadeh following his refusal to bow to Syrian pressure to sign the constitutional

amendment to extend the mandate of former President Emile Lahoud. Since then, all of the attacks have targeted anti-Syrian politicians and journalists officials, the latest being the September 19, 2007, attack on March 14 MP Antoine Ghanem (reftel).

¶10. (C) While the motives for al-Hajj's assassination are not yet clear, and despite the noble efforts of our LAF contacts to keep the military out of the political quagmire, we doubt that the ongoing political stalemate and General Sleiman's front-runner status for the presidency have no connection to this latest tragedy, which occurred on the second anniversary of March 14 MP Gebran Tueni's assassination. Sleiman himself has yet to comment on the attack. While it is too soon to judge the impact on the presidential race, one thing is certain: this event will increase tensions in an already highly-charged political climate.

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